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DIVISION OF

WESTERN EUROPEAN AFFAIRS

Office of the Historian
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SOME ECONOMIC AND OTHER ASPECTS OF

ITALIAN SOMALIA

From: American Consul

Howard F. Withey.

Naples, Italy.

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APPROVED:

Coert du Bois,
American Consul General.

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This wide territory, heavily forested over 600,000 square kilometers, has been known to the peoples inhabiting the Mediterranean basin since the remotest times of antiquity. Phoenician navigators sent by Nekos II, of the 24th. Egyptian dynasty, sailed from the strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, gateway to the Red Sea, on an adventurous voyage of discovery in the Indian ocean. Around Cape Guardafui there are still traces of mines completely worked out in very ancient times and the rocks of the region bear many inscriptions which testify to the enterprise of the Pharaohs.

Relations between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean.

In all probability the Phoenicians and Egyptians sent their vessels to these regions in order to obtain cargos of what the Italians call "galeno argentifero" - which I understand to be a mineral composed of lead sulphate, silver and iron in certain combination. This mineral is found in great quantities at Candala today. The debris of a wide variety of vitreous ware, some of it very beautiful, is found in the country in large quantities: applications of black glass, fragments of green and sky blue glass with metal incrustations and, particularly, copper. A little statue of Isis, in characteristic Egyptian terracotta, proves the Pharaonic incursions, although the other evidence in that regard is abundant. It is well known that the sovereigns of both upper and lower Egypt sent vessels to the coast in search of myrrh, incense, ivory and fine cabinet woods.

In 1909 the remains of a Phoenician vessel, probably dating from about 1000 B.C., were found on a beach near Citta del Capo, thus showing the delusion of Vasco di Gama in thinking he was the first to round the Cape of Good Hope and navigate these waters. In 147 A.D. a Roman army commander, having doubled Cape Guardafui, explored the whole coast of Somalia and penetrated the country for a hundred Roman miles. He discovered the outlets of three large rivers and took back with him to Rome samples of ancient household effects and of the exotic fruits of the land. However, it was, of course, the opening of the Suez Canal which made possible frequent and easy water communication between the Mediterranean and the Indian ocean.

Imports and Exports.

Somalia is in a position to supply Italy with sheep and goat skins and cow hides, together with wild animal skins such as leopard and dig-dig; also native butter, salt, gum arabic, myrrh, incense, native cotton, live animals, castor oil, sesame, seed oils, alcohol, pea-nuts, maize, mother-of-pearl, frozen meats, ambre-gris, bananas, pineapples, sugarcane, tapioca, capok, bread fruit flour and, in general, the products natural to the soil and climate. The colony, on the other hand, furnishes, or could be made to furnish, an important outlet for Italian goods such as cotton, rayon and silk textiles, soap, flour, cement, tractors (most of those now in use came from the United States), automotive vehicles in general, mineral oils, et cetera.

To a considerable extent much of the mutual exchange just indicated is potential rather than actual for a real development of commercial relations between Somalia and Italy lies in the future. Business is largely in the hands of indians and Arabs who, though long resident in the colony, retain their British or Anglo-Arab national ties. There are only three important Italian commercial organizations, the others being chiefly French, German, Jewish and Indian. The Italian concerns just mentioned are the Società Coloniale Italiana, the Compagnia Commerciale Italiana per l'Africa Orientale and the Società Anonima Fratelli Mortara. The principal commodities handled by these trading firms are lumber, cement, ^{iron}implements, roofing materials, machinery, paints and varnishes and liquid fuels. The business men of the colony, or some of them, ascribe the present and past stagnation of commercial business with Italy to several causes: indifference on the part of Italian exporters, the Indian competition which benefits by very low overhead, and the proximity of the free port at Aden.

Complaint among the colonists is also directed toward what they regard as excessive maritime freight rates which reduce and discourage shipments of colonial products to Italy. There are two navigation companies which maintain ports of call in Somalia. The "Tirrenia" company (which receives a subsidy of some 46 million lire a year from the Italian government) maintains its 1925 freight tariff and a minimum rate of 6 gold francs the quintal. La "Libera

Triestina"

Triestina" organization, is said to have about a 20 per cent cheaper freight tariff.

Credit in the Colony.

Since 1932, it is reported that the Mogadiscio branch of the Bank of Italy has paid larger dividends than the branches in Eritrea and Libya, although credit has been extended with great conservatism. The complaint is made that colored clients of the bank have been more favorably treated than the whites. One gets the impression that it is felt by some Italian residents in the colony that the difficulty with the credit situation is due to an archaic organization rather than to the indifference and mistakes of bank directors and authorities.

Lack of credit facilities is also said to be a serious factor in holding back the development of active business between the colony and the mother-country.

Agricultural Possibilities.

It is asserted that there are many such possibilities still undeveloped or but little developed. The dune regions are said to be fitted not only for pasturage but also for growing a very hardy cotton (*ispidue barbadense*). The alluvial plains from Maddei to Giuba and from Bardera to Chisimaio produce, it is stated, wheat, sesame, cotton, tobacco, sugar cane, peanuts, beans and capok. There are, however, serious problems to solve: utilization of the water supply, labor supply and organization of the ports and shipping facilities. It is argued

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that many methods of conserving and directing the water supply are impracticable because of the rapid silting of the rivers and that the most promising method of handling the flowage and water conservation difficulty is blocked by the circumstance that the key to the situation lies in Abyssinian territory.

Colonization and Machine Cultivation.

The writer of the article upon which this report is based (see source note at end) expresses the opinion that, as things stand, it is better to concentrate upon cultivation which requires the minimum of hand labor and to utilize machinery to the maximum practicable. Neither colonists nor natives appear to be numerous. On the other hand, he thinks that the Balad-Brava zone is well fitted to Italian colonization. An earlier attempt of that sort failed, it is indicated, through lack of organization and faint-hearted methods. It is stated that the climate in this section - cooled by the ocean - is not particularly unfavorable and that, while malaria exists it is not of a pernicious type, as is commonly supposed. Diseases to which whites are subject are apparently few in number, typhus does not exist and pulmonary diseases are rare. The climate is even, with rise in temperature during the months of April and May, October and November. Children thrive as a rule. [As is usual in such climates, sexual diseases and abuse of alcohol play more havoc than is the case in more temperate climates.] On the whole, there is said to be an opportunity in Somalia for earnest,

hardworking

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hardworking Italian peasants to make a better living with less effort than they can make in Italy - always providing they will stick to the soil and be contented to make their permanent homes there: any colonist expecting to make a quick and easy fortune in Somalia will be quickly disillusioned.

The Soil. .

There is an infinitude of plants which grow spontaneously in the colony and, so far, no one has had the opportunity or taken the trouble to classify them scientifically. Neither has a scientific geological chart of the country ever been prepared, so that for anything anyone knows to the contrary, pleasant surprises in that regard may come at some future time.

At present, bananas constitute the leading production and the plant grows in almost unlimited quantities and with an exceedingly low cultivation cost. The land for such cultivation is vast, for a strip one kilometer wide along all the rivers is always available. There are no plant diseases which affect bananas. There is a striking circumstance in connection with the banana business, namely, the great spread between the price received by the grower and that paid by the consumer in Italy. If the writer of the basic article is right about it, the grower gets only 70 centimes a kilogram. One banana of the best grade retails for the same amount at Naples. The writer just referred to ascribes this situation to the avarice of the Italian navigation companies and is very bitter on the subject, stating that the

banana ships make a net profit of 380,000 lire on each monthly trip between the colony and Italy.

[He indicates that there is a nigger in the woodpile somewhere but that it is not discreet to pry into the matter too deeply.]

It is argued that, in the long run, the prosperity of the colony will be best promoted by the practice of a diversified agriculture on a comparatively small individual scale and that large scale-quick profits methods of concessionaires and large proprietors which have been the rule in the past are the result of a mistaken policy and damaging to the colony.

Not for publication.

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CONFIDENTIAL NOTE

The foregoing report is merely a condensation of an article which appeared in the February 6, 1935 issue of IL LAVORO FASCISTA. It is freely translated here because it contains some rather interesting information about a country concerning which it is not easy to get current unofficial information.

The author of the article (G. Giacomantonio) was, apparently, sent to Somalia by the paper to report on conditions and the article itself is unusually outspoken for an Italian journal. It clearly reflects the discontent of Italian colonists. Perhaps some of the statements should be taken with a grain of salt. They have a familiar ring and recall complaints common in the colonists' organs in Tunisia and Algeria. However, Italian banana importers have complained to the government many times with regard to extortionate freight rates - the last time a few months ago. Nothing ever happened. Most of the capital of the navigation companies concerned is believed to be in the hands of stockholders at Milan. According to talk I have heard in Naples, it was the impression of the people interested that the Milan stock-holders had too much influence with the government to be in fear of discipline from that quarter. Just lately, however, it has been stated quite definitely by persons who professed to know about the matter, that the government has informed the navigation interests concerned that as soon as they

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they get their money out of the two banana ships they built for the trade, their freight rates will be cut to a reasonable figure by official action.

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NOTES ON DEVELOPMENTS IN ITALIAN
EAST AFRICA

Rating	Distribution Instructions

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By: American Consul

Withey

Howard F. Withey.

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AVIATION

According to reports from Asmara, it is announced that the Asmara-Kartoum air line will be inaugurated soon, thus linking Asmara with Mogadiscio by direct air route. It is expected that a regular service of scheduled flights will commence within a short time. The announcement just referred to followed successful trial flights by three planes of the ALA LITTORIA which occurred recently.

PREPARATIONS FOR FURNISHING TROOPS AND CIVILIANS WITH AN ADEQUATE WATER SUPPLY

[The influx of troops and auxiliary military and semi-military outfits made it imperative to augment the normal water supply as quickly as possible and intensive work appears to have been in progress along such lines for several months: the flow of existing aqueducts has been increased and supplemental sources of supply are being provided for. If press reports are to be accepted, the military forces are encountering and will encounter no hardship through lack of water in the East African colonies themselves.]

At and around Asmara over 70 wells have been equipped with pumps which give a combined capacity of 5,000 cubic meters a day which is said to be sufficient for the entire zone. These pumping units will serve as supply bases for water-carts and tank-trucks functioning or to function for the supply of camps established outside the inhabited centers. Drinkable water from the high plateau region has

also

also been utilized to form reserve reservoirs.

The Adi Nefas aqueduct has 7 kilometers of conveyance line and 2,000 cubic meters flowage a day. Another aqueduct at Nefasit has been finished and is reported to produce 400 cubic meters a day.

For supplying Massaua it is planned to obtain 1,000 cubic meters a day from an aqueduct which feeds on a natural slope without the necessity of using power or siphoning to get the water from source to point of delivery. A further supply in the same section is to be assured from another aqueduct functioning by the use of pumps: reported daily capacity 8,000 cubic meters. All the foregoing are supplemented by tankers operating along the coast.

A water distillation plant is in course of construction at Massaua and it can, it is said, be counted on for 1,000 cubic meters a day. An aqueduct from Dogali to Massaua with an estimated future capacity of from 1,000 to 2,000 cubic meters a day, is in process of building.

In Somalia it is expected that sufficient extra water will be obtained from the distilled supply available at Uebi Scebeli and Giuba, the tankers serving Mogadiscio and the distillation plant at the last mentioned city.

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Sources:

IL MATTINO - July 2, 1935.
IL LAVORO FASCISTA of recent date.

Quintuplicate to Department - Commercial Office.
1 copy to Commercial Attaché, Rome.

Central File: Decimal File 865B.52, Internal Affairs Of States, Somaliland, Lands., no date. n.d. MS European Colonialism in the Early 20th Century. National Archives (United States). Archives Unbound, link.gale.com/apps/doc/FSC5109731386/FGDSC%3Fu%3Domni%26sid%3Dbbookmark-GDSC. Accessed 18 June 2025.